

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

March 17, 2020

PRESS CONTACT:

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**DRT Response and Guidance During COVID-19 Outbreak:
Offices Closed to the Public, Temporary Operational Procedures in Place**

NASHVILLE—Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT), the federally designated protection and advocacy agency for people with disabilities in Tennessee, is committed to the health and safety of our staff, their families, the people we serve and our communities. In these unprecedented times we continue to protect the rights of Tennesseans with disabilities and provide guidance to our community to ensure inclusion and accessibility for all.

DRT RESPONSE

Because of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and in an effort to prevent community spread, DRT is taking the following precautions until at least April 3, 2020, or longer if needed. These safeguards are in place not only to protect our staff and clients, but also the communities where we live and especially populations that are more vulnerable to the virus.

Please know we are equally committed to continuing our services to protect and advocate for people with disabilities during this time.

Starting March 16, 2020, and continuing until at least April 3, 2020, or longer if required:

- We have asked staff to work from home. Our Technology Team is providing support and resources to allow our staff to continue to do their work and offer services to our clients and the community with as little interruption as possible. You can still contact our main line and individual staff through email addresses or phone numbers previously provided.
- Our physical offices throughout the state will be closed to the public
- Our intake phone lines and our office and staff phone lines will remain open during regular business hours.
- Our staff will not participate in any in-person meetings at our offices or in other locations unless deemed urgent and necessary by the ED. We will use email, telephone, video conferencing and other means to communicate with clients and others. Any organizations that are scheduled to utilize our large conference room in Nashville or in any of our offices are now cancelled.
- All staff speaking engagements and exhibiting events are cancelled and all non-essential staff travel is suspended.

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GUIDANCE

More than 29% of Tennesseans have a disability (CDC, 2019) and even more have access and functional needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic it is essential that full accessibility for individuals with disabilities is considered in communications and public health responses. With this in mind, DRT provides the following guidance to health departments, state and local agencies, and other entities disseminating information about and planning responses to this evolving public-health situation.

COMMUNICATIONS

- ALL televised press conferences and media briefings should have open or closed-captioning, and a qualified, on-site American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter close to the speaker and always in the camera shot, so that he or she will be in the view of the public.
- ALL information shared must use clear plain language to be accessible for those with cognitive and/or intellectual and developmental disabilities. The use of pictures and pictograms is also recommended.
- Provide contact information for requesting alternative formats (Braille, large print, etc.).
- Ensure websites and other digital information is accessible to people with vision, hearing, reading, speaking, learning and dexterity disabilities.

SERVICES

- People with disabilities, including individuals who require assistance with managing hygiene, MUST NOT be discriminated against due to stigma or any other reason during this public health crisis.
- Consider mobility, hearing, vision, speech and cognition difference in the development of quarantine procedures and public health guidance.
- Prioritize consistent, uninterrupted provision of supports and services to people with disabilities, including access to caregivers, service animals and assistive devices when planning quarantine and other responses.
- Collaborate with service providers who frequently serve people with disabilities such as, meals on wheels, home health and visiting nurses, oxygen delivery and others, to plan home delivered meals/food/medication/supplies.
- Ensure where virtual classrooms are used during school closures, that children with disabilities continue to receive the aids and services included on their Individual Education Plan and 504 Plan.
- Identify services and supports, including mental and behavioral health services, which can be continued through virtual access.
- Ensure paratransit and other accessible transportation options are considered when planning for service changes, so access to doctor's appointments and other appointments, such as dialysis and infusion therapy, can continue.

As DRT receives more information and resources specific to people with disabilities, we will share these on our social media sites and website. We are continuing to monitor this rapidly evolving situation regarding COVID-19 and will provide updates.

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About Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT)

Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT), formerly Disability Law & Advocacy Center of Tennessee, is the designated protection & advocacy agency for Tennessee. DRT provides free legal advocacy services to protect the rights of Tennesseans with disabilities. For 40 years, DRT has served over 50,000 people through direct services, education, and systemic advocacy. For services, call 1 (800) 342-1660 or email GetHelp@disabilityrightstn.org.

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